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AUTHOR Curt, Carmen Judith Nine
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ABSTRACT

Based on the idea that the brain consists of hemispheres which control different types of behavior, this paper argues that the Puerto Rican school system is deteriorating because its emphasis on left hemisphere (quantitative) activities does not synchronize with Puerto Rico's cultural orientation toward the right hemisphere (qualitative activities). A chart is presented which enumerates features of the Puerto Rican school system according to left hemisphere activities. But Puerto Rican students, it is said, typically react negatively to English as a second language classes that are taught with a left hemisphere orientation, without positive feelings and warmth. Thus, advice is given on incorporating feelings and emotions into ESL teaching. Teachers are encouraged to establish an "intimate classroom atmosphere," and research findings are summarized in support of this idea. Four appendices are included: a diagram of the brain's hemispheres; a survey instrument used to gather students' feelings toward English classes; a poem; and song lyrics about living and changing. (KH)

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TEACHING ESL FROM THE RIGHT HEMISPHERE OF THE BRAIN

by

Carmen Judith Nine Curt

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TEACHING ESL FROM THE RIGHT HEMISPHERE OF THE BRAIN*

Carmen Judith Nine Curt, Ed.D.
Professor, College of Education
University of Puerto Rico

I am sure you are very well aware of the great interest that has been afoot on the topic of the hemispheres of the brain and its implication for education. It "hit" me two years ago, in 1978, when I heard Marshall McLuhan's talk on our local TV, Channel 6, with Dr. Ethel Ríos de Betancourt as moderator. I hunted—literally—his talk down until I was able to get the chart on the hemispheres of the brain included as Appendix I. Ever since, I have been fascinated by the topic, and thrilled to see how many people are sharing my curiosity. There are already many newsletters on the topic. Many people are also discussing what to do with an educational system that seems to be so very left hemisphere. This, of course, both in the United States as well as here, since our educational system came from the USA close to a century ago. This is what Edward T. Hall has to say about the system in his book *Beyond Culture* (p. 208; 261):

> (The) system, incidentally, ...was modeled after the Prussian Army by Horace Mann, first commissioner of education in Massachussetts.
>
> Mann was a great believer in organization and thought that the Prussian Army was the most perfect organization produced by mankind for molding human beings.

* This conference was read at the TESOL Convention, University of Puerto Rico, on November 15, 1980.

Interesting, isn't it? Allow me, though, to give you some background on the subject of the hemispheres, so it will be clear that our educational system is not just left hemisphere, but also quite inappropriate to our Puerto Rican preference for right hemisphere activities. Possibly herein lies the reason why our educational system manifests deterioration, as evidenced in the recent lowering of all public high-school student scores in the CBET (College Board Entrance Test) in practically every subject matter tested.

I had come to the conclusion that our culture, our Puerto Rican mores, seemed to be in total reversal to the American culture through my observations of non-verbal behavior in both. McLuhan's talk on the hemispheres gave me an explanation for the differences. It seems that our culture, together with other Mediterranean cultures from where so much that is Puerto Rican proceeds, seems to prefer right hemisphere activities as opposed to the United Stated which prefers, together with other Nordic European cultures, left hemisphere activities. Let me mention to you quite briefly some of my observations of non-verbal behavior both here in Puerto Rico and in the United States that seem to substantiate this observation. Most of these are described in detail in my book *Nonverbal Communication.*

1. Kinesics— gestures, smile, body movement
2. Proxemics— space
3. Haptics— touching
4. Polychronism *v.s.* monochronism— Many things *v.s.* one thing at a time
5. Gazing— Occulisics
6. Art, creativity
7. Religious feelings
8. Emotionality

I took a very close and hard look at our educational system *vis a vis* McLuhan's chart; and this is what I found.

Left Hemisphere	Our School System
1. Speech Verbal	1. Our school system gives most of its attention to developing verbal skills. The book, plus the teacher's monologue are their main means

of instruction.

2. Logical, Mathematical	2. Mathematics is ranked quite high among the subjects taught, as well as by the professions that need it: engineering, science, business administration.
3. Linear, Detailed	3. Grades, content units, even the school buildings are segments that follow segments. Everything must be specified, including operational objectives, activities, materials to be used and an outline of the content.
4. Sequential	4. Grade follows grade, and units follow units, with an expanding concept for content teaching. Elementary level is the base for Intermediate and Senior level, with the University topping it all up.
5. Controlled	5. There is strict discipline in the whole system, with lieutenants (principals), captains (superintendents), and coronels and a general (Sub-Secretaries and Secretary). The teacher is the sergeant, and the students are the soldiers (privates). Information —not creativity, not the emotions,—is the important component of the system.
6. Intellectual	6. The whole aim of the system is to give and transmit information. This is needed, according to the system, to succeed in the work world. This is synonymous with happiness.

7. Dominant	7. The mostly promoted skill through the test system is that of competition, not of support. You must come on top, and that is classified as superior. The letter "A" has come to have such a connotation. The rest are definitely inferior. And that includes the "B's", "C's", "D's", and definitely, "F's". No chance is given for retesting and relearning. Once you get an "F", that is final, no matter how devastating that may be to your self-esteem.
8. Worldly	8. The interest is with the universe and the physical aspect of *man*. The discussion of the non-physical dimension of man, his emotions, his transcendence, his intuition, his creativity are ruled out, and some are considered taboo.
9. Active	9. Students are always doing something: exercises, filling out workbooks, sports, misbehaving, etc. Silence, contemplation, are bad words. The teacher talks, talks, talks all the time.
10. Analytic	10. Intuition is a bad word in the system. But everything is analyzed, and the science courses have a tremendously high status. There is an unstated belief that creation and all its components is accesible to man's analysis. Since everything that is, can be analyzed, then God is not, since He cannot be analyzed. This type of system has to be either atheistic or at least agnostic. He

	may exist, but cannot be known.
11. Reading, writing naming	11. Reading, writing and the naming of things, giving them labels, are important skills in our system. The book is the main teaching resource.
12. Sequential ordering	12. Things must be presented piecemeal, and oftentimes the relationship of the whole to its parts, which actually gives the parts meaning, is lost. The context of things is consistently left out.

Although man seems to have something akin to two consciousness, two minds, both collaborating to make what is understood to be a healthy and normal human being—logical, responsible, active, but also artistic, religious, creative, intuitive—our educational system only emphasizes one side, one consciousness of man: the left one, the analytical one. Many people in the United States and the world over are saying this and shouting at the top of their voices, substantiated by research with split brain patients. Marshall McLuhan says that to concentrate on one side of the brain alone is to turn people into alianated beings. Some of these articles are quite scary, but we are living the horror in our school system, and in ourselves. Let me explain further.

Two years ago, I asked my students to mark off on a list of *sentimientos* ("feelings") (included as Apendix II) how they had felt during their twelve years of English instruction in their English classes in our public system of education. This is what I found. Sixty-two percent (62%) out of 86 marked off the following feelings:

frightened—frustrated—confused—worthless—depressed—bored

Now, I would like to use the same list here (Appendix II) and ask you to mark off how you, as English teachers, feel and have felt regarding your profession, your daily work in your classrooms and at home, preparing for your teaching. I want you to be as honest as my students were in answering the same. One thing: I will not collect the papers. Let them be your daily meditation from now on.

I am going to concentrate today on "feelings" and "emotions", and

not on how to teach ESL through holistic methods such as presenting the whole system first, before teaching the parts, which I do with phonetics and grammar; or the use of music and songs in our ESL classrooms which I also do; or how to use their creativity in writing their own dialogues, which I have also done; or how I use acting, drama, in teaching ESL, which many of you have done; or even, what is the role of prayer in the teaching of ESL, which I could also talk about. I will not talk about these very important topics for one reason: I have come to the conclusion that the most important and crucial point in ESL or any teaching, particularly in Puerto Rico, is the style of relating which prevails in the classroom, for example, what feelings are promoted there by the teacher-student, and student-student interactions. I believe this to be so because it seems that what keeps our polychronic society, our very high-context society—in Hall's terms—bonded quite tightly together are "feelings", and among them that of "belonging", as in Japan, for instance.

> In Japan, one has to "belong" or he has no identity. (Hall, p. 63)

However, it is the opposite in the USA, and its left hemisphere educational social system shows it.

> We (in the USA) are only peripherally tied to the lives of others. It takes a long, long time for us to become deeply involved with others, and for some this never happens. (Hall, p. 65).

Moreover, "intimacy" is of tremendous importance to a polychronic, high-context society like ours or like the Japanese.

> The Japanese are pulled in two directions. The first is a very high-context, deeply involved, enveloping intimacy that begins at home in childhood but is extended far beyond the home. There is a deep need to be close, and it is only when they are close that they are comfortable. The other pole is as far away as one can get. In public and during ceremonial occasions (and there are ceremonies of a sort every day, even when people meet), there is great emphasis on self-control, distance, and hiding inner feeling. (Hall, p. 2)

As I read the above, I marvelled at how well Hall was describing us, the Puerto Ricans.

I have concluded from the above that unless we have this type of

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intimate classroom atmosphere in Puerto Rico, we do not have learning. Such an atmosphere is not competitive but supportive, the type of atmosphere required by Mexican Americans in their classrooms, as attested by Brown in his book *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching*.

I also feel the presence of very negative feelings in our society bonding ourselves together... but against others. A healthy educational system should help our Puerto Rican children to handle them, or as we say in *puertorriqueño, a bregar* with them. I cannot say our educational system does. Dr. Pedro Durand, a most perceptive Puerto Rican psychiatrist, says that there are four negative feelings that make Puerto Ricans very sick: **fear, guilt, resentment,** and feelings of **worthlessness.** (The *copla* sung in our *cañaverales* around the turn of the century: *Yo soy dita y tú eres coco; yo no valgo na' ni tú tampoco*). I have very painfully come to the conclusion that our school system (and much in our society) supports and sustains many of these feelings by making of itself a competitive system for grades and social recognition. Besides, it is extremely authoritarian and does not promote real personal growth, self-acceptance and joy. One of our social psychologists, Professor José Torres Zayas, recently wrote the following in one of his columns in the newspaper *El Mundo:*

> A living example of authoritarian relationships is found in the structuring of personal inter-relations in our Department of Public Instruction. The Superintendent is a rigid and unbending power figure, quite inaccesible, who makes school principals, assistants and all those below him tremble. However, the school principal in turn becomes a bossy ogre who is very inflexible in his relationships with his teachers. Of course, the recipients of all the hierarchical charges are the students at the bottom of the ladder. (*El Mundo*, Oct. 5, 1979).

The authoritarian Department of Public Instruction and the authoritarian, scolding, screaming, uptight classroom teachers are projecting and transferring terrible things to our students. And the learning process, which is a most refined communication process, comes to a standstill.

> Vigil and Oller astutely observe that negative affective feedback, regardless of the degree of cognitive feedback, will likely result in the abortion of future attempts to communicate. This is, of course,

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> consistent with the overriding affective nature of human interaction: where a person is not at least affirmed and his communication valued, there is little reason for communication. So, one of the first requirements for meaningful communication, as has been pointed out in earlier chapters, is an affective affirmation of the other person. (Brown, p. 182)

I have come to the very definite and deeply felt conclusion that I have no desire to continue perpetuating and strengthening this sad and destructive psychological history of my people. Thus, if anything I do or say in my classroom supports this set of negative feelings, I have to change it. So, I have been changing my methodology, my testing procedures; in fact, my whole interaction style as a teacher, when it seems to be perpetuating these four negative feelings in my students. In Transactional Analysis and in any good psychotherapy we find this bit of information: if someone does not get stroked, *reconocimiento*, which by the way, is indispensable for survival, then he will accept and look for "discounts", *pasmes;* sometimes even provoking such things as insults, physical hurt and ridicule. These tell him that he is at least alive. I believe most of the atmosphere in Puerto Rican classrooms is of this sort, a discounting atmosphere, no matter who is teaching or what subject matter is being taught. I do not want to continue this dreary and dreadful tradition. Enough!

About two months ago I asked several women English teachers how they felt in their classroom situation, wondering out loud whether they were projecting their own negative feelings unto their students. They agreed that possibly the students feel and have felt bored in their English classes, as well as confused, frustrated, depressed and even terrified, because teachers in Puerto Rico feel bored, confused, frustrated, depressed and even terrified... both as human beings and as professionals. One of the teachers present that day broke out in tears when I asked the group if this was true. Women have been playing the horrendous role of victims for too long. I feel it is time we stop, or else society will stop, will commit suicide with us. (See poem by Julia de Burgos, entitled "Yo misma fui mi ruta", included as Appendix III).

I decided to stop long ago. In the past five years, something akin to a miracle has happened in my life, and my teaching shows it. I have faced up to my negative feelings—all those mentioned before—and I decided to change them, painfully and slowly. But change them I must, for they were destroying me as a person and as a professional. I have never been happier, more effective, more spontaneous, more respect-

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ful of my students, more excited, and more creative than now... on my 58th birthday, just two weeks ago, and on my 34th year at the University of Puerto Rico. When I asked my students, on that same questionnaire on feelings to mark off how they had felt in my classroom, these were the *sentimientos* marked off by 82% of them!

encantado	*fascinado*	*enamorado*	*vivo*	*emocionado*
charmed	fascinated	in love	alive	thrilled

I then realized that is the way I have felt these past years, and the good feelings are growing. Apparently, I am also projecting them to my students in my classroom.

I have been sharing these findings with my colleagues and life-long friends of all my life, and also with some of my students. Here are some of their comments: "Yes, you have changed, Dr. Nine." "Yes. You were considered *el cuco* in General Studies. What a difference now!" "Judy, you are not resentful anymore." "You seem to be so at ease with yourself." "You look so damned happy, woman!" And the other day, a male professor and friend from Humanities English met me in Pedagogía and shouted: "Beautiful! This woman is beautiful! I want to marry her!" I almost cried from joy, and from the very bottom of my heart I gave thanks to my Lord and God for it, for He has been a prime mover in this incredible change in my life, by showing me beyond the shadow of a doubt that He is Father, and that His love for me is unchanging and non-judgmental. and that He created me one, unique and non-repeatable, a most worthy creation I should protect and treat with the utmost reverence. As I grow in this awareness, I have also begun to treat and deal with my students with the utmost reverence.

We could talk here till midnight about methods, content, Right-Brain, Left-Brain teaching, and we would be talking about very important things. Brown also admits this, but with a twist:

> Stevich (1974) noted that in previous paradigms methods have first provided means, then goals, then data flow, and finally personal relationships. This order, which according to Stevick, makes for "defensive" learning, is now being reversed so that we start with personal relationships. We have become human; we are teaching persons. (Brown, 244)

The message I want to leave with you is that the real magician, the real "trick" for success in teaching in Puerto Rico—or for that matter,

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anywhere else—our involved and empathetic students, who need intimacy and a sense of belonging is the teacher. Not a dead, or partially alive teacher, but one who is fully human and fully alive, one who can afford to feel and live all the positive feelings given to us by our Creator to feel. Those feelings, for better, or I should say, for worse, our culture, the history of humanity has made us forsake... in psychological terms, "repress". I also look into books and study heavily, but my main assignment these days is to look inside myself, to find out the richness, the unique, non-repeatable reality that is me. From there, with daily tries at cleaning up the garbage of resentment, fear, guilt and worthlessness, I try to enter life and my classroom full of love, joy, respect, peace, pride, generosity, assurance; and with feelings of deep worth, gladly and somewhat madly, continue teaching ESL. I will be teaching my students to feel the same way, which is really my present goal as a teacher. And the unexpected bonus is that they are learning a lot of ESL!

My talk on the hemisphere ends with a song. (See Appendix I). It reminds me that the ME who is now committed to LIVING had been committed to dying. But no more!

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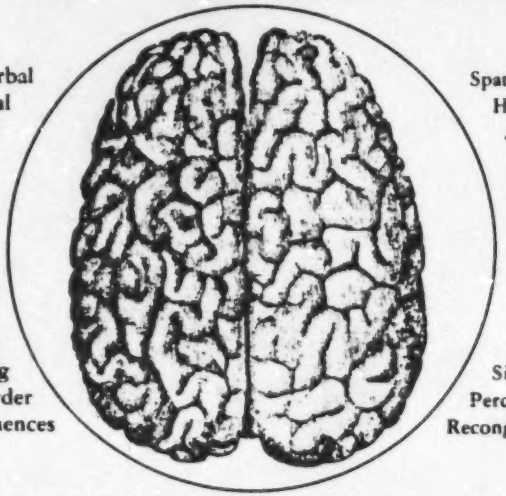
QUANTITATIVE

QUALITATIVE

Left Hemisphere
Right side of body)

Speech/Verbal
Logical, Mathematical
Linear, Detailed
Sequential
Controlled
Intellectual
Dominant
Worldly
Active
Analytic
Reading, Writing, Naming
Sequential, Ordering
Perception of Significant Order
Complex Motor Sequences



Right Hemisphere
(Left side of body)

Spatial/Musical
Helistic
Artistic, Symbolic
Simultaneous
Emotional
Intuitive, Creative
Minor (Quiet)
Spiritual
Receptive
Synthetic, Grestalt
Facial Recognition
Simultaneous Comprehension
Perception of Abstract Patterns
Recongnition of Complex Figures

Ridi Tratter, 'The Other Hemisphere', *Science News*, Vol. 109, April 3, 1976, page 218.

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Appendix II

Lista de Sentimientos

A

abandonado
aburrido
abrumado
abusado
acomodado
adecuado
adolorido
afligido
agitado
agónico
agotado
agradable
agresivo
aislado
alarmado
alegre
alejado
aliviado
altercador
amable
amado
amargado
ambivalente
amenazado
amoroso
ansioso
aniñado
añorante
apático
apesadumbrado
apresurado
arrepentido
asolado
astuto
aterrorizado
aturdido
audaz
avaricioso
avergonzado

B

bajo
belicoso
bello
bufón

C

calmado
cansado
capaz
cariñoso
cautivado
celoso
codicioso
competitivo
complacido
condensado
confiable
confiado
confuso
conspicuo
contento
cruel
culpable
curioso

D

deleitado
deprimido
derrotado
desconsolado
desenfrenado
desesperado
despavorido
destructivo
desvalido
determinado
desvalorizado
distraído
dividido
divino
dolido

E

electrificado
embelesado
emocionado
enamorado
encantado
encogido
encontrado
energético
enervado
enfurecido
engañado
engañador
enojado
escéptico
esperanzado
estupefacto
estúpido
exasperado
excelente
excluído
expectante
extasiado

F

fascinado
fatigado
feliz
feo
frenético
frugal
frustrado
furioso

G

gozoso
gruñón

H

hablador
hechizado
herido
"high"
histérico
honrado
horrible
humillado

I

ignorado
impaciente
importante
impotente
impresionado

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incómodo
infeliz
inferior
inflexible
inmortal
inocente
inquieto
inseguro
inspirado
insultado
intimidado
intranquilo
inútil

L

lacónico
lastimado
libre
limitado
lindo
lleno
llorón
lloroso
loco
lujurioso

M

manipulado
manipulador
malcontento
malicioso
maligno
malo
malvado
maravilloso
maravillado
melancólico
mezquino
miserable
místico
modesto
molesto
motivado

N

nervioso
nostálgico

O

obsesionado
odioso
orgulloso

P

peleón
perseguido
perseguidor
perturbado
petrificado
piadoso
placentero
precario
preocupado
protegido

Q

quisquilloso

R

rabioso
realizado
rechazado
recompensado
refrescado
relajado
relamido
rencoroso
con remordimiento
rendido
resentido
retirado
reverente
ruin

S

saciado
sacudido
satisfecho
seguro
servicial
solo
superior

T

temeroso
tenaz
tenso
terrible
tímido
tonto
tranquilo
triste
travieso

U

usado
útil

V

vacío
vago
vencido
violento
violentado
virtuoso
vital
vivaz
vulnerable

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Appendix III

Yo misma fui mi ruta

Yo quise ser como los hombres quisieron
que yo fuese:
un intento de vida;
un juego al escondite con mi ser.
Pero yo estaba hecha de presentes,
y mis pies planos sobre la tierra promisora
no resistían caminar hacia atrás,
y seguían adelante, adelante,
burlando las cenizas para alcanzar el beso
de los senderos nuevos.

A cada paso adelantado en mi ruta
hacia el frente
rasgaba mis espaldas el aleteo desesperado
de los troncos viejos.

Pero la rama estaba desprendida
para siempre,
y a cada nuevo azote la mirada mía
se separaba más y más y más de los lejanos
horizontes aprendidos,
y mi rostro iba tomando la expresión que
le venía de adentro,
la expresión definida que asomaba
un sentimiento
de liberación íntima;
un sentimiento que surgía
del equilibrio sostenido entre mi vida
y la verdad del beso de los senderos nuevos.

Ya definido mi rumbo en el presente,
me sentí brote de todos los suelos de la tierra,
de los suelos sin historia,
de los suelos sin porvenir,
del suelo siempre suelo sin orillas
de todos los hombres y de todas las épocas.

Y fui toda en mí como fue en mí la vida...

Yo quise ser como los hombres quisieron
que yo fuese:

I Was My Own Route•

I wanted to be just like men wanted me to be:
an attempt at being alive;
a game of hide-and-seek with my own self.
But I was made of present moments,
and my steady feet standing on promising
land,
could not bear to walk back,
and they kept on moving forward, forward,
avoiding the ashes to reach for the kiss
of new paths.

At each step on my forward route ahead
the desperate flutterings of the old tree
trunks
at my back.

But the branch was permanently
torn away,
and each new beating made my eyes
detach themselves more and more and more
from the far away and formerly learned
horizons;
and my face increasingly began to show
the expression that came from within,
the definite expression that hinted at
a feeling
of deeply felt liberation;
a feeling that came out of
the equilibrium between my life
and the truth of the kiss offered to
my new paths.

After my route became defined,
and clear in the present,
I felt to be a sprout coming out of all lands,
of lands without history,
of lands without a future,
of a land always a land without borders,
belonging to all men and to all times.

And I became everything within me
as life became all in me.

I wanted to be just like men wanted me
to be:

• This is a literal translation of the poem in question just to communicate its contents. No effort has been made to render into English the poetic nuances of one of Puerto Rico's foremost women poets.

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un intento de vida;
un juego al escondite con mi ser.
Pero yo estaba hecha de presentes;
cuando ya los heraldos me anunciaban
en el regio desfile de los troncos viejos,
se me torció el deseo de seguir a los hombres,
y el homenaje se quedó esperándome.

an attempt at being alive;
a game of hide-and-seek with my own self.
But I was made up of present moments,
when the heralds were already announcing
my presence
at the regal procession of the old tree trunks,
my desire to follow men got twisted around,
and the homage was left waiting for me.

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Appendix IV

Me olvidé de vivir

De tanto correr por la vida sin freno
Me olvidé que la vida se vive un momento;
De tanto querer ser en todo el primero,
me olvidé de vivir los detalles pequeños.

De tanto jugar con los sentimientos
viviendo de aplausos, envueltos en sueños;
De tanto gritar mis canciones al viento
ya no soy como ayer; ya no sé lo que siento.

Me olvidé de vivir,
Me olvidé de vivir,
Me olvidé de vivir,
Me olvidé de vivir.

De tanto cantarle al amor y a la vida
Me quedé sin amor una noche de un día;
De tanto jugar con quien más yo quería,
Perdí sin querer lo mejor que tenía.

De tanto ocultar la verdad con mentiras,
Me engañé sin saber que era yo quien perdía,
De tanto esperar lo que nunca ofrecía,
Hoy me toca llorar, yo que siempre reía.

Me olvidé de vivir,
Me olvidé de vivir,
Me olvidé de vivir,
Me olvidé de vivir.

De tanto correr por ganar tiempo al tiempo
Queriendo robarle a mis noches el sueño
De tantos fracasos de tantos intentos
Por querer descubrir cada día algo nuevo.

De tanto jugar con los sentimientos
Viviendo de aplausos envueltos en sueños
De tanto gritar mis canciones al viento
Ya no soy como ayer; ya no sé lo que siento.

Me olvidé de vivir,
Me olvidé de vivir,
Me olvidé de vivir,
Me olvidé de vivir...

Me olvidé de vivir,
Me olvidé de vivir...

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